

# Leggett Freezing Hiring In County

Montgomery  
Tightening Belt  
To Curb Deficit

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Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) announced a freeze yesterday on hiring in the 9,400-person workforce under his jurisdiction, stepping up efforts to close the county's record \$401 million projected shortfall for fiscal 2009.

Leggett's chief administrative officer, Timothy Firestine, said the county would make exceptions in hiring for public safety jobs, bus drivers and other essential positions for at least the next five months.

The hiring freeze underscores the gloomy outlook for the county's finances and comes as Leggett has recommended \$23.6 million in midyear trims to social services, bus service and overtime for the police and fire departments. The announcement follows Schools Superintendent Jerry D. West's decision to impose a freeze on spending and most hiring.

"The sooner we react, the better off we'll be," said Firestine, who will be charged with signing off on any hiring beyond essential positions. "This is a very serious gap we face."

Jurisdictions throughout the Washington region are contending with a financial crunch, in part because of a softening housing market. Anne Arundel County Executive John R. Leopold (R) also announced a hiring freeze yesterday, effective immediately. In December, Charles County imposed a four-month hiring freeze and required departments to cut spending by 10 percent.

Montgomery last imposed a hiring freeze in 2003. At that time, the County Council also raised taxes and delayed cost-of-living raises for

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## Montgomery Imposing Freeze to Combat Deficit

employees to balance the budget.

Montgomery's executive branch typically turns over 600 to 700 jobs a year. There are currently 66 vacancies.

Council President Michael Knapp (D-Upcounty) called Leggett's decision a "reasonable approach" given the state's finances. Because of actions taken during the

special legislative session, Montgomery is expected to receive about \$16.9 million less in state aid than anticipated next year. Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) must cut more than \$200 million more from next year's state budget to meet a legislative mandate.

"There are still a lot of pieces out there that have to play out," Knapp said.

At the same time, Knapp urged

Leggett to ensure flexibility in the freeze to pursue the county's priorities, such as bringing in police recruits.

In November, Leggett asked Montgomery's department and agency directors to shave 2 percent from their budgets, for a savings of \$64 million, including \$36 million from the school system. Weast has said the system will not be able to meet Leggett's request.

Council members yesterday submitted questions to Leggett about his belt-tightening plan. They voiced concern about free transportation for schoolchildren and low-income seniors, social services and the redeployment of firefighters. The council plans to act on Leggett's cuts when it meets Jan. 15.

*Staff writer John Wagner contributed to this report.*